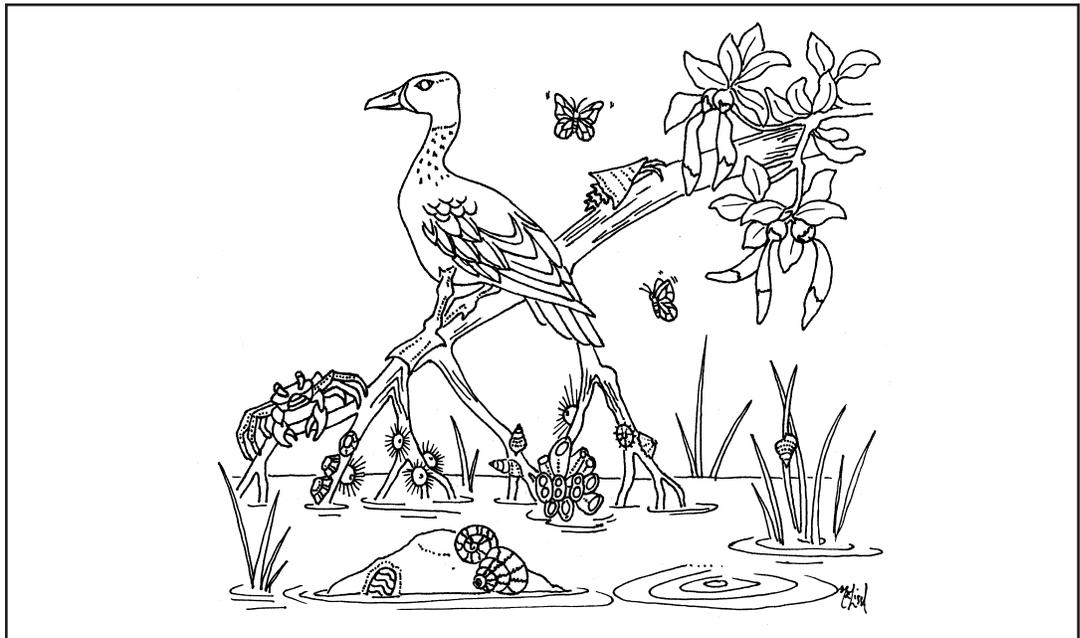




Endangered Species of The Bahamas



WEST INDIAN WHISTLING-DUCK

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Dendrocygna arborea

COMMON NAMES

Tree Duck, Whistler, Mangrove Duck, Night Duck

DESCRIPTION

The West Indian Whistling Duck is the largest and rarest of the 8 species of unique whistling ducks found throughout the world's tropical regions. The Whistling duck is a large goose-like duck with relatively long legs that extend beyond the tail in flight. It usually reaches heights of between 19"-22". The feathers on the upper part of the duck are mostly brown with pale edging, the throat is white, but the lower neck is streaked with black. The chest is reddish and underbelly is white with dark spots. The bill is black and legs are dark with a greenish tint.

DIET

The West Indian Whistling Duck is nocturnal (active at night) and feeds mostly in the evenings. The birds are generally seen at dusk when flying in flocks to feeding places in search of the highly appreciated fruit of the Royal Palm. Other foods eaten are wits, seeds, grasses or food crops notably rice or corn.

REPRODUCTION

The breeding season is ill-defined and varies from one island to another. Nests are almost always near water and have been reported in tree holes, on horizontal branches, in clumps of bromeliads, in reeds near the ground or on the ground among the roots of fallen trees in bushy cover. Clutch size (number of eggs) is generally 10-16 eggs. Both parents incubate the eggs, alternating 24 hour shifts throughout the 30 day incubation period. Family bonds are strong. Males assist in care of the young which stay with their parents for at least several weeks, and possibly several months, post-fledging. Family groups behave like goose families, feeding together and threatening other individuals and family groups who get close.

HABITAT

The West Indian Whistling Duck inhabits both fresh and saline (salt) water bodies such as lagoons, swamps, mangroves, rice fields and palm savannas. It is known to spend its daylight hours hidden in the vegetation i.e. mangrove or coppice areas. Populations of Whistling Ducks are widely scattered throughout most of the Caribbean from the Bahamas and Greater Antilles and adjacent islands and in a great number of the smaller archipelagos east to the Lesser Antilles.

STATUS

The West Indian Whistling Duck has clearly declined in numbers throughout its range, however information on this duck is scarce. Once common and widespread throughout the West Indies it has been hunted to extinction on many islands, including Jamaica, and has been reduced to small isolated populations on other islands. In the Bahamas the species is considered rare and is known to occur in Inagua National park and on Hog Cay, Long Island (a privately owned cay) which supports a resident population of 380 birds which are fed regularly by the owners of the cay. The West Indian Whistling Duck is protected by law under the Wild Birds Protection Act. The Convention for International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) lists the West Indian Whistling Duck as Appendix II meaning it is a species which is threatened and stands to become endangered.

THREATS

West Indian Whistling Ducks are threatened by many human activities. They are listed as vulnerable in the IUCN Red Data Book (IUCN 1994), and populations on many islands appear to be declining although no rangewide surveys have been conducted to document this decline. Major threats include:

1. Excessive hunting. Although legally protected in much of its range, enforcement of laws is inadequate and poaching is common.
2. Habitat loss through wetland drainage. Growing human populations, the tourism industry and development in many West Indian Islands has resulted in a loss of habitat necessary for the survival of this species.
3. Predation by introduced mammals (especially raccoons, hogs (Andros), and Indian Mongoose). Predation impact is well-documented, but is probably a factor for both eggs and adult birds.
4. Pollution from domestic sewage, industrial waste and pesticide run off.
5. Natural catastrophes such as drought and hurricanes.

The West Indian Whistling-Duck is the subject of a recently funded educational program by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Hemisphere Program. The funding has been granted to provide educational materials and training of personnel to six different countries in the region: Barbuda, Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Turks/Caicos islands. The educational program will focus on the importance of wetland conservation in general.

INTERESTING FACTS

- The West Indian Whistling Duck is the most endangered duck in North America and one of the two rarest ducks in the Western Hemisphere.
- The Whistling Duck is not especially shy, and where not persecuted lives quite happily in close proximity to man.
- The West Indian Whistling Duck has specialized tracheal structure which gives it the ability to vocalize a distinctive, hauntingly, beautiful whistling call.



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